DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 168 782 RC 011 262

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TITLE Decentralizing Education in Rural Alaska Highlights Needed Research.
PUB DATE Apr 79
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (April 1979, San Francisco, California)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Alaska Natives; Curriculum Development; *Decentralization; *Educational Finance; Educational Needs; Educational Quality; Elementary Secondary Education; Information Dissemination; Instructional Staff; Program Development; *Research Needs; Resources; *Rural Education; *School District Autonomy; Self Determination; State Legislation; Technology
IDENTIFIERS *Alaska

ABSTRACT

In July, 1976, Alaska's 21 Regional Educational Attendance Areas (REAAs) came into being; these REAAs provide elementary and secondary education in a huge geographical area for approximately 11,000 pupils, 70% of whom are Native. Prior to 1976 education for these rural areas was controlled centrally by a distant state agency. Beginning in 1975, the REAAs had a one-year transition period in which to draw regional boundaries, elect and minimally train school boards, hire staffs, and locate offices. Substantive educational issues have emerged following the completion of the second year of REAA operation. Among these issues are: how local does local control need to be; has 100% state financing for REAAs provided sufficient resources; how can board members, administrators, and teachers acquire more training in their roles and an understanding of each other; how can curriculum and programs integrate education into the local community and its culture; and how can the amount and type of resources and technology available to both teachers and students be increased. Despite the significance of the vent of the REAAs, little official attention has been directed toward researching or systematically evaluating the phenomenon. Without adequately focused, implemented and disseminated research, development of quality education in rural Alaska seems unlikely. This study of the REAAs utilizes information from mail questionnaires to superintendents and board members, existing data, one case study, isolated individual studies, and an end-of-project seminar. (BR)

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DECENTRALIZING EDUCATION IN RURAL ALASKA HIGHLIGHTS NEEDED RESEARCH

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Paper presented at symposium
"The Changing Context of Alaska Native Education:
Recent Research and Unmet Needs"

Annual Meeting of the
American Educational Research Association
San Francisco
April 1979
Session #15.04

RC 011262

DECENTRALIZING EDUCATION IN RURAL ALASKA HIGHLIGHTS NEEDED RESEARCH

Introduction

Nineteen-seventy-six is a significant date in Alaska's education history, particularly for its Native residents, the Aleuts, Eskimos, and Indians. In July 1976, Alaska's twenty-one regional rural school districts came into being. Called Regional Educational Attendance Areas (REAAs), these districts provided the first experience with local control of education for most rural Native residents. Until 1976 education for these rural areas was controlled centrally by a distant state agency. However, local control through elected representatives and administration closer to home had long been sought as ways to improve the quality of education, simultaneously making it more responsive to the special needs of rural students and the varied village life styles.

The regional rural districts were a result of an act of the Alaska Legislature in 1975. Regional boundaries were drawn, school boards were elected and minimally trained, and staffs were hired and offices located--all in a one-year transition period.

These twenty-one new districts provide elementary and secondary education for an approximate total of only 11,000 pupils, seventy percent of whom are Native.[1] Although enrollments are low, with only two districts having more than 1,000 pupils, distances are great. Several districts serve land areas larger than entire states in the "lower forty-eight."

The move toward locally controlled education in Alaska should be of interest to educators outside Alaska for two reasons:

(1) the advent of local control of education for Native residents could be considered as a large-scale demonstration of Indian Self-Determination which is but slowly and in piece-meal fashion being implemented in Indian communities elsewhere; and

(2) in decentralizing control and delivery of education to the most remote, rural areas of the state, Alaska went against the national trend of consolidating smaller districts into larger ones.[2]

A Report of the REAAs After One Year: The Study Process

Despite the significance of the advent of the rural regional districts, little official attention was directed toward researching or systematically evaluating the phenomenon. Further, other educational events occurring almost simultaneously diverted attention and made researching the effects as an

isolated experience difficult. These other events included: (1) the state's agreement to provide a high school in each community where there is an elementary school,[3] (2) expansion of television and other telecommunication demonstrations to rural villages and schools, (3) compliance with federally mandated bilingual/bicultural programs,[4] and (4) continued negotiations for the transfer of BIA schools.[5]

As one superintendent of a new district noted:

> There was such a dynamic environment at the time. There were so many variables operating. It was not just the fact that we were going into a brand new school district, but at the same time we were asked to create new high school facilities, we were asked for bilingual programs. . . . The whole thing occurred in such a dynamic movement of activity. It is hard to say what would have happened had it not taken place at one time.[6]

Another factor complicating any research effort was that rather than studying one rural system, there were now twenty-one. Each was influenced by a different set of conditions--cultural, economic, and geographic. Local control was intended to allow educational development to adapt to these diverse situations; therefore, the experience of any one RFAA could be predicted to be unique in at least some areas. Indeed, if the intent were met, each should be developed differently.

In attempting to confront this variety of external and internal variables affecting the new districts, plus the condition of limited research funding, our study[7] of the new districts was severely restricted by use of mail questionnaires, collecting existing data, and contracting a single case study. We also attempted to locate isolated research efforts such as graduate research papers related to the topic. Our primary aim was to preserve data related to the first year of the new districts, to describe events and how people felt about them, and to indicate areas in need of further study.

Our data base included questionnaires to superintendents and school board members and, although the responses were limited and subjective, the narrative comments illuminated specific perceptions. Existing data analyzed for the study included minutes of board meetings for each of the new districts and the State. Similar to the questionnaires, minutes revealed the perceptions of the recorder but, keeping this in mind, both sources provided interesting insight into what people felt was occurring in their regional areas.

Project funds allowed only one case study which we hoped would serve as a prototype. A Native educator was hired to spend one week in a new district, informally visiting with administrators, teachers, parents and students. Of course, the permission from the district was obtained prior to the visit. The case study added an in-depth dimension which was not present in the more general data collected from all districts. More such studies would have greatly improved the data base.

Isolated, individual studies which focused on some aspect of the new districts (and were in progress at the time of our report) provided a unique data source. Of the three dissertations and one graduate paper located, two were completed in time to publish summaries with our report. We also requested papers from a state agency and a teachers' organization on specific topics known to be of concern, as well as specialized input from our own researchers. These contributed papers added greatly to the breadth of coverage we were able to provide and focused attention on the issues.

The contributing authors and staff, plus a few carefully selected "critical others," were invited to participate in a seminar at the end of the project. This seminar was specifically directed toward reviewing the draft report, discussing each other's findings, and identifying issues for further study. The entire seminar was audio-taped, and an edited version serves as the final chapter of the report (a table of contents from the report is attached).

A Report on the REAAs After Year One: Research Needs

Although our report only covered the first year of the new regional districts, this paper, absent formal research, takes advantage of another year of observation and reflection.

Substantive educational issues have emerged following the completion of the second year of operation of the rural regional school districts. These issues individually are not necessarily new to rural or Native education, in Alaska or elsewhere, but the creation of the REAAs plus the State's commitment to provide local high schools in every community has brought to bear increased attention and resources. Alaska's rural settings, the multicultural nature of the population, and the substantial monetary resources to serve a relatively small population suggest Alaska as a favorable location for rural educators to study these issues and the solutions being developed to meet them. In this section I will briefly highlight the research issues as I perceive them.

Local Control

How local does local control need to be? Can regional boards satisfy local desires for governance? Each regional district was required to have advisory committees in each community in addition to the regional board. Do advisory Community School Committees (CSCs) bring regional school governance close enough to home; should they be strengthened; or are they unnecessary? Does having regional and community boards demand too much of potential participants in sparsely populated communities?

From our study of the first year of REAAs, it appears clear that in many communities the CSCs were thought to be necessary in providing local input to the school and advice to the regional board. Despite some administrators' feelings that the Committees are an unnecessary burden (and proposed legislation may change their mandatory nature), it is doubtful that the concept of local control through regional districts will work without the CSCs.

What does appear necessary to make the CSC concept effective is provision for guidelines within each district on the role of these Committees, their responsibilities, and how they are to relate to the regional board and to local and regional administrators. If the CSCs prove effective, they could provide the degree of localism desired for each community's school as well as provide local input and relief to the REAA board in its excessive duties. Researching this governance aspect of the rural districts is crucial if one is to evaluate local control as a desired versus an actual outcome.

Finance

REAAs receive 100% of their "basic need" funding from the state based upon the Public School Foundation Program formula. City and borough districts also are formula-funded, based upon the same state finance program and its basic need definition, but they usually add to this amount from local tax revenues. Since REAAs are not organized units of local government, and therefore have no taxing power, they are allowed extra funds per student above the formula equal to the average local tax revenue per average daily membership of city and borough districts. Has this method of 100% state financing for REAAs provided sufficient resources? Have REAAs been responsible in handling funds that they do not have to raise from within their own communities?

Despite the inexperience of the new REAA boards and budgets based on insufficient facts and past records, only one REAA required supplemental funding the first year. In program matters, there were few charges of state interference, and most of these related to established federal and state regulations with which all districts must comply.

Major research questions concerning the definition of basic need and setting equitable cost differentials for rural areas remain unanswered.

James Conant, in an article entitled "Why full state funding needn't kill the power of local school boards," said that his concept of full state funding was never intended to do away with school boards or to diminish local control.[7] In his plan, local boards would submit an educational plan in terms of manpower needs which would then be translated into dollars by the state staff. The RFAAs, as an example of the application of 100% state financing along with local program control, deserve to be further analyzed to test the reality of such plans.

Training Needs

The report cited the necessity of training as discussed by board members, administrators, and teachers. Each group believed the other two groups needed to learn more about their individual roles and needed to increase their abilities to act effectively.

Regional and community boards do need to better understand the federal and state regulations by which they must abide; but beyond that, they should be encouraged to evolve new educational philosophies and methods. Rural Native residents are new to educational control; they want to be allowed to make their own mistakes and learn from them. Further, all community members, not just those currently serving on school boards, need to understand the REAA system, or else the pool of knowledgeable citizens will remain limited.

Some have suggested that the need for REAA board training has been overstated and that it is the administrators who need to be trained to work with the boards. Training suggestions have ranged from increasing the cross-cultural awareness of administrators to reeducating them to the benefits of community involvement.

Perhaps the most constructive attention directed towards training needs has been in teacher preparation. At the undergraduate level, the University's

Cross-Cultural Education Development Program has, for eight years, been training teachers for rural schools through a field-delivered, cross-cultural approach. Although considered highly successful by some, the program is expensive to deliver, limited in size, and lacking in descriptive and evaluative information. The REAAs, therefore, will continue to depend on teachers without specialized rural Alaska training for some time.

Other teacher training issues include whether rural teachers require any special skill training--pre and inservice--which should be recognized in revised teacher certification requirements. Much training remains to be done. A variety of training needs must be met, the processes evaluated and information disseminated so others will benefit. Rather than discussing training needs in an accusatory way, the cooperation of everyone concerned with education will be necessary so that all may learn.

Improved Curriculum/Programs

REAAs are increasingly turning their attention and resources to improving current educational offerings and creating new ones, particularly for the many new village high schools. This work is being accomplished by regional and community boards, parents, teachers, administrators, specialists and outside consultants in varying combinations. Concerns are for: (1) expanding the range of subject matter, especially as to incorporating cultural aspects and career options, and (2) experimenting with new methods and techniques, including expanding the school into the community and beyond it through exchange and travel programs.

Integrating education into the local community and its culture, as well as preparing students to confidently choose among a variety of options outside the community if they wish, is the most difficult challenge faced by the new rural districts. The ingenuity already being shown by several of the REAAs in meeting the challenge of providing quality high school education to rural students, using resources both within and outside the local community, merit systematic evaluation and dissemination if this information is to prove useful to others.

Shared Resources/New Technology

Related to developing new and better quality rural programs is the need to increase the amount and type of resources available to both teachers and students. Small schools will not have the range of subject-matter teachers who

are available in larger city schools, nor will small schools have well-stocked laboratories, libraries, A-V centers, or specialists nearby. Further, inadequate phone and mail services have meant teachers could wait a month or more for a response to a simple request. What is being done to provide supplemental course materials for students and resources for teachers? How is technology being employed?

It was recognized that the new school districts would need decentralized resource services, but that the cost of a well-supplied and -staffed resource center in each REAA would be prohibitive. Consequently, the concept of Regional Resource Centers was included in the REAA legislation. Services suggested for the Centers included fiscal, instructional support, staff development, and board training for member districts. Unfortunately, the legislature delayed funding the Centers and no information is available as to the effectiveness of their operations at this time.

Experimenting with nontraditional delivery, the Alaska Department of Education has developed a five-year plan to carry communications and instruction via satellite. The project, called Educational Telecommunications for Alaska, includes design, testing, and delivery via satellite of electronic mail service, computer help to schools, phone lines, and radio for instruction and nation-wide access to educational resources. Again, evaluative information is not available.

Small rural schools are not new phenomena, but modern technology and the wealth of instructional resources now available provide opportunity for quality education previously unobtainable.

Summary

Central to all of the above research issues is the need to learn more about the developing REAAs and a method whereby that knowledge will be shared. A co-ordinated development, research, evaluation, and dissemination process to support the new districts does not exist. Decentralization, in creating twenty-one locally controlled districts to replace one state agency, was a political solution to answer the demands of rural residents: efficiency and economy were not primary concerns. Unless the districts unify under leadership from the Department of Education or some other coordinating body, their ability to solve the many problems they now face in providing quality education will be severely limited. Without adequately focused, implemented and disseminated research, development of quality education in rural Alaska seems unlikely.

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Notes

[1]Alaska Department of Education, "Enrollment by Ethnic Group, First Quarter, 1977-78 " (Juneau, Alaska: Alaska State Department of Education, n.d.).

[2]Jonathan P. Sher, ed., Education in Rural America A Reassessment of Conventional Wisdom (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Special Studies in Education, 1977), pp. 43-75.

[3]David H. Getches, Law and Alaska Native Education (Fairbanks, Alaska: University of Alaska, Center for Northern Educational Research, 1977), p. 25.

[4]Kathryn A. Hecht, "Lau and Educational Governance: National Implications of the Lau Implementation in Alaska," Method: Alaska Perspectives 1 (Winter 1979).

[5]Don M. Dafoe, The Governance, Organization, and Financing of Education for Alaska Natives (Fairbanks, Alaska: University of Alaska, Center for Northern Educational Research, August, 1978), pp. 42-47, 88-91.

[6]Kathryn A. Hecht and Ronald K. Inouye, New School Districts in Rural Alaska: A Report on the REAAs After One Year (Fairbanks, Alaska: University of Alaska, Center for Northern Educational Research, 1978).

[7]Ibid.

[8]James Conant, "Why full state funding needn't kill the powers of local school boards," The American School Board Journal 165 (April 1978): 40-42.

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